

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 30
Number 4 *Parameters Winter 2000*

Article 12

11-17-2000

The Plague of Ideas

Ralph Peters

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

Recommended Citation

Peters, Ralph. "The Plague of Ideas." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 30, 4 (2000).
<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol30/iss4/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

The Plague of Ideas

RALPH PETERS

© 2000 Ralph Peters

From *Parameters*, Winter 2000-01, pp. 4-20.

People sense, in these disordered times, that more has changed than words have yet expressed. Ours is a restless, unsettled age, straining between unprecedented hopes and old terrors, bounded on its shining edge by possibilities undreamed of even by our younger selves and on its darker horizon by vast, enduring misery worsened by rekindled hatreds. A world order that defined half a millennium, the age of European imperial domination, ended with the collapse of the Soviet incarnation of the Russian empire, and no unitary political system will replace it in our lifetimes.

We have entered a long, inchoate interlude, in which the concentration of wealth and military power in a minority of nations obscures the centrifugal nature of contemporary change. This is an age of breaking down, of the destruction of outgrown forms, of the devolution of power. The process of building again atop the ruins and reorganizing our societies will occupy us at least through the new century. We can be sure of little, only this: the speed of change is without precedent; for the first time in history, change has come to the entire globe, if to differing degrees and with radically different results; and no state or society can rely solely on past forms to shape the future.

Comfortable security models and industrial-age warfare between competing powers seem as obsolete as Marxism, while, in much of the world, even the legacy of statehood left behind by the old empires is under threat. Ideological and physical control over populations crumbles relentlessly in every lagging state, and hatreds and blood ties bind where law cannot. Authority sputters, increasingly ignored, wherever humans find it inconvenient. Although the evidence had never fully disappeared, across the last decade the world's ruling and educated classes began rediscovering the primitive nature of man and his unattractive tendencies when civilized constraints are brushed aside. We, the long-empowered, do not know what to do.

In these eruptive times, thoughtful men and women have voiced concerns about new or resurrected threats that ignore or exploit national boundaries, both those of robust states and borders that are little more than a pretense hoping for a bribe. Whether speaking of organized crime in its countless mutations, of terrorism, of epidemic disease, of financial manipulations, or of the assaults of digital anarchists, those who would alert us do good service. Yet, the greatest "transnational threat" is the closest kin to our brightest hopes. Of all the dangers globalization brings, none is so immediate, so destabilizing, and so irresistibly contagious as the onslaught of information--a plague of ideas, good and bad, immune to quarantine or ready cures, under whose assault those societies, states, and even civilizations without acquired resistance to informational disorders will shatter irreparably.

Global Infection

Several years ago--an antique age by technology's present measure--Americans enjoyed a brief infatuation with books and films about horrific diseases that, once unleashed, might ravage middle-class neighborhoods. While sober attention must be paid to even the least chance of new pandemics, whether sparked by global-man's intrusion on remote territories, or spread by adept madmen or the decay of biological warfare facilities in the former Soviet Union, the alarmists missed the epoch-defining symptoms erupting in front of their faces: For the first time in history, thanks to a dynamic constellation of communications tools, ideas can spread to the world's masses more quickly than epidemic disease.

Historically, disease outpaced data, with ideas lagging far behind. Rumors might precede the first fever in a village, but a serious plague reached more human beings far more swiftly than any abstract concept ever did. Disease moved at the

speed of human travel--the same velocity as the rawest information. Ideas were, statistically, far slower. One traveling merchant or sailor, or simply a rat conveyed by ship, might infect a hundred overnight, and thousands within a week, but no saint or prophet ever persuaded men in truly epidemic numbers at epidemic speed. Concepts, to say nothing of true ideas, need explication, digestion, comparison, and practical experimentation before they find more than a transient, intoxicated acceptance. But disease did not rely on persuasion. Ideas moved at the speed of a man's feet, then of his beast of burden, next of his caravan or caravel, then of his automobile or passenger aircraft, only to arrive at rejection far more often than not. Disease did not offer choices.

Persuading people to accept a new belief, whether regarding the path to salvation or the efficacy of hygiene, required fortuitous historical timing, reserves of patience greater than any single life span, and sacrificial single-mindedness--to say nothing of the ruggedness and adaptability of the idea itself. Until the meridian of the European Renaissance, the Roman church was able to label every reform movement within its geographic sprawl a heresy and to suppress it before it could overturn anything beyond local hierarchies--since the church's enforcers could move as swiftly as any dissenting missionaries, as well as moving in considerably greater numbers. The creed riding on the back of a mule could not outpace a powerful bureaucracy.

Then the first information revolution struck, that of the book or broadside sheet printed cheaply on a movable-type printing press, fortifying the Protestant Reformation by enabling the spread of its timely ideas beyond the scope and speed of bureaucratic response. The book still moved at the speed of the human's means of transport, and it could not spread its "infection" with the vigor of the Black Death, but the equation had begun its long shift. The Reformation was the crude dress rehearsal for today's "information revolution."

Elsewhere, numerous societies, even entire civilizations, managed to seal themselves against contagious information from foreign parts. Japan, an island nation, is a classic example of a state that successfully turned its back on the world for centuries until external forces, empowered by informational synthesis, grew irresistible. China, vast and ever porous at the edges, nonetheless managed, through the power of its culture and the culture of its power, to hold the greater world at bay for thousands of years, its long introspection punctuated occasionally by invasions that were quickly digested. Self-satisfaction and perceived sufficiency, a sense of order perfected, made for a world within a world. Today's China, with its exposure to the greater world increasing hyper-geometrically, is a new entity--its evolving qualities akin to a chemical compound transferred from a vacuum chamber into the open air. Whether or not the reaction will be explosive remains to be seen.

Even in late-Renaissance Europe, Spain, the apotheosis of a Counter-Reformation regime, managed to close not only its own borders but those of its then-incomparable empire to unwanted influences and the information explosion of the early modern era--but, given its strategic integration into the European system, with destructive results. Self-deprived of the nourishing strains of Moorish and Jewish culture, and militantly opposed to northern Europe's secular innovations, Spain's vibrant culture stiffened and slowed, its economy withered (enervated by vast, annual welfare checks from the New World's silver mines), its statecraft grew impotent, its military slowly decayed, and the population lost the impetus to modernity. Theories that blame the Spanish decline on excessive military spending mistake the symptom for the disease: Spain was an early casualty of the first, primitive information revolution, as various information-resisting regimes are of today's deluge of data.

Information and Wealth Formation

Indeed, the fates of European states and peoples from the 16th century forward provide a rudimentary model for the successes and failures in today's world, when post-modern economies--not the governments lagging behind them--shape the rules of global interaction and even the United States cannot pretend to be a hermetic fortress. Consistently, those nascent European states that had the most liberal information policies dramatically outperformed those states or regions where the Counter-Reformation clamped down hard not only on religious dissent but on the sciences in their fumbling, haunted childhoods.

The most informationally liberal European state of its day, the Dutch Republic, prospered astonishingly even as it fought expensive wars to achieve and guarantee its independence. Only after a civil war permanently destroyed the darker powers of kingship and assured essential informational freedoms did more-populous, better-protected England

outstrip Holland in wealth and power. Meanwhile, Italy, the cradle of the Renaissance, grew static, even backward, under the book-banning, idea-fearing, comforting and comfortable tyranny of the Counter-Reformation. Corrupt and hypocritical, somnolent and cruel, outwardly pious and privately lascivious, silver-age Italy resembled today's Iran, becoming, literally, a masked culture.

Inevitably, the greatest Western thinker about the power of information to drive change emerged in the British Isles in the guise of a political economist. Adam Smith, with his invisible hand of the marketplace, described two centuries in advance why the United States will continue to outperform mainland China, despite the astonishing energies the Chinese people bring to bear. Certainly, others have recognized the greater dimensions of Smith's revelation implicitly--most recently Thomas Friedman in his incisive book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*--but it needs to be stated explicitly: Adam Smith confined his observations regarding the self-correcting force of that "invisible hand" to free markets because, in his day, the economic sphere was the most liberal sphere within Britain (a situation reversed, with pathetic consequences, in the middle of the 20th century and only put back to rights under Margaret Thatcher). Certain political and social truths could not yet be uttered, but the market increasingly was allowed to speak its mind from London to Glasgow and Edinburgh. Describing the capitalism he knew and could foresee, Smith intuited the dynamics of the information age precisely.

That invisible hand applies not only to the trader's domain, but to virtually every aspect of a healthy human society. Mature, informationally open societies, such as today's English-speaking nations of Western culture, are self-correcting, not only economically but socially, culturally, and politically. Citizens consummate change before bureaucracy can stymie it. The people vote not only with their wallets, but with each minor, mundane choice. Self-improving through dynamic trial and error, learning from the results of countless unfettered actions, these societies confound competitors with the speed with which they can innovate, seemingly defiant of physical principles equating mass with inertia.

Above all, states whose behavioral contours are determined by that invisible hand are practical. The past is preserved in museums, not in confining cultural strictures. Free societies guided by the aggregate effects of individual choices are not only the highest expression of human--and humane--attainment to date, they are far and away the most efficient. While their defense establishments, behaviorally distinct and informationally crippled, limp behind, states that do not constrain the flow of data nonetheless generate sufficient wealth to allow for a startling degree of military waste.

In these successful societies, the efficacy and worth of ideas are determined in the same way that the price of a household object is arrived at. Societal rules are not enforced from above or inherited uncritically from buried generations, but are selected and constantly refined from below by the living. The results are not only high-quality goods at low prices, but adaptive individual and collective behaviors that allow the population, statistically, to maximize its human potential.

The culturally liberal nations of the West are, in many-layered senses, marketplaces of ideas (to the dismay of intellectuals on the right and the left, with their totalitarian instincts). The citizens of such states have acquired, over generations, if not centuries, the internal compass necessary to navigate through the storms of information confronting them today. While a minority of citizens from the underclass and aberrant performers who make headlines with statistically irrelevant acts may believe that which is false or even lunatic, the average citizen makes highly effective economic, moral, and cultural calculations on a daily basis. Simply put, the good citizen has been culturally educated to pass the true-and-false tests of everyday life. He chooses what works best, then makes it work better.

This is no small thing. The most threatening aspect of today's information revolution is the power of comforting but false information to infect populations that lack the instinct for empirical reality that enables the West and key East Asian states to outperform the rest of humanity. Whether we choose as our examples the Gulf War, the economic competition of the Cold War, or the comparative successes of the two Korean states, it is absolutely clear that the side that deals with facts and freedom clobbers the side that indulges in fantasies and repression.

Instead of being self-correcting, societies deficient in the ability to discriminate between different qualities of information grow self-deluding, embracing reassuring myths--or comforting rumors--instead of adjusting to embarrassing realities. This is true not only of individuals and states, but of entire civilizations today. Serbia, the

Russian Federation, and various sub-Saharan African and Middle Eastern countries offer trenchant examples. When an informationally inept population must compete with one that is informationally adept, the deficient state or region always loses.

Over the past few decades, the West often had to listen to self-adoring lectures from Asian tyrants whose informationally sluggish countries were achieving impressive growth rates. But those states were developing so quickly because they finally had entered the industrial age two centuries after it began. Meanwhile, the United States and a few like-spirited nations, derided as irresolute and faltering, took a deep breath and plunged into the post-industrial information age. The "social laxity" decried by authoritarians proud of a handful of new factories turned out to be the cultural foundation for the creation of fabulous wealth and power. Now, societies with undereducated, informationally stunted populations and a litter of smokestack industries find themselves left behind again, their national economies dwarfed by the revenues of individual Western corporations. Populations that make running shoes for populations that design computer networks have won the global economic booby prize.

Cholera and the Telegraph Key

Returning to the greatest familial establishment in economic and political history, Britain and the United States, the 19th century saw the beginning of the second information revolution, that which has accelerated and expanded so dramatically in our lifetimes. The first of the great cholera pandemics barely preceded the advent of the telegraph, and the latter was able to report news of later outbreaks ahead of their arrival. This was a critical step in the emancipation of information from the tyranny of physical transport. While it was an inefficient and inadequate tool for transmitting ideas, the telegraph could move limited amounts of data over great distances at a comparatively low cost.

A stunning innovation in its day, the telegraph nonetheless remained only the crudest precursor of the information dissemination devices of our time, since it was an easily controllable device, subject to governmental oversight in various forms, as well as to moral codes, physical infrastructure limitations, cost restraints, and the limited volume of data it could transmit. Better suited to deliver orders than insights, it remained a tool of the already-empowered echelons of society, although its benefits increasingly reached the average citizen in the form of brief personal messages and the from-the-scene dispatches that accelerated the newspaper's phenomenal expansion in the 19th century. Of note, the English-speaking countries fostered the private development and use of telegraph networks, though with state backing at crucial points, while continental states favored greater governmental control--initiating a crippling monopolistic pattern in communications that still hampers Europe today, although the advent of wireless communications and international pressures are finally breaking down these antique inhibitors.

Likewise, when the telephone appeared, with its hint of anarchic possibilities, English-speaking nations were more likely to permit the private sector to exploit the technology--which the private sector did more swiftly and efficiently--while European states generally preferred state monopolies on communication, imposed as soon as each new means matured. When the radio crackled to life, both market democracies and repressive regimes saw its potential, although they read its utility differently. At one extreme, the United States adopted a liberal licensing program that diffused a large degree of communicative power to localities, while, at the other, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany centralized control of the first broadcast medium. In the United States, the radio voice might speak *to* the government, but in the gathering European darkness the voice on the radio spoke *for* the government.

Radio marked the early adulthood of our information revolution. For the first time, *ideas* could be disseminated to the masses, along with unadorned information and entertainment (simultaneously, feature films and newsreels hinted at the power of today's media, although they reached much smaller audiences than did radio). Given our contemporary challenges, it is worth noting that the initial masters of the communication of ideas over the airwaves were men with messages of hatred, just as the internet has become a forum for hate speech, delicious delusions, and conspiracy theories today. Hitler may have been a poor strategist in the end, but he was a master of the broadcast medium.

Even in the United States, the early days of radio were marred by populist--and popular--demagogues, from racist politicians to men of the cloth who ranted against all things foreign in terms far fiercer than those used by more recent profiteers and panderers of the airwaves. It was not unlike the broadcast environment in many less-developed countries today. Only under the stress of worldwide depression, then of world war, did the voices of liberal democracy come into

their own--one thinks, inevitably, of the incomparable Winston Churchill and of the savvy Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose physical disability might have marred his effectiveness in the soon-to-come day of television, but who was perfectly pitched for his fireside chats over the radio waves.

Yet, even radio was subject to laws, regulations, and, everywhere, ultimate state control. A small station in the midst of America might broadcast bigotry, as some still do today, but there are lines the disembodied voice may not cross. In wartime, underground stations might appear, or pirate broadcasts from offshore might enliven a peace, but radio is ultimately controllable, given the ease with which it can be monitored and its dependence on licensed frequencies.

In fact, the information revolution of our time has not been a straight-line march of progress. Television was, in one sense, a step backward in informational freedom, even as it increased phenomenally the amount of information it conveyed by adding the visual element pioneered by the cinema. While bringing images of a greater world to remote populations and capable of communicating sophisticated concepts through multi-sensory effects, television is a much more expensive endeavor than radio for those who want to originate a signal, to say nothing of offering attractive programming. With the television age came a reassertion of governmental control over broadcasting virtually everywhere, with corporate wealth a secondary filter in market democracies, and that control is only now experiencing a gradual breakdown with the advent of the cheap satellite dish.

Still, the synergy attained by all these communication means, as well as from teletypes and facsimile machines, voice and video cassettes, satellite communications, cell phones, and wireless, hand-held computers, began to reach critical mass as the 20th century drew to a close. Increasing global prosperity, though uneven in its distribution, meant the proliferation of receivers--first radio sets, then televisions, then computers that, joined to the internet, finally give the common man a broadcast means of his own. The informational floodgates opened. Even comparatively simple devices destabilized societies, from the Soviet bloc to struggling states freed of both the colonial yoke and colonial order.

Ideas can now travel more swiftly than any human being--or disease. The global AIDS epidemic illustrates the point. An unknown sickness (admittedly slow-acting) appeared nearly simultaneously at different points on the globe, with fearsome initial results. But local infection rates and trends quickly diverged. In informationally adept, self-correcting societies, even libertine subcultures acquired the information about the disease necessary to modulate and then dramatically reduce rates of infection. In informationally deprived or self-mythologizing societies, the epidemic has raged on, devastating entire generations, states, and regions. In Africa, where idea-transference remains a slow process due to both infrastructural and educational deficiencies, the disease moved classically along trade routes, its impact, scope, and nature initially unrecognized then long denied. Meanwhile the United States hyperbolized its own epidemic and waged multiple aggressive educational campaigns, resulting in transmission rate declines in those social groups that were informationally aware and responsive to fact-based arguments.

Today, we still hear heartbreaking denials of medical evidence from African leaders dumbfounded by the AIDS epidemic's implications, while, in the United States, the disease has been confined largely to micro-groups within social subgroups that are unwilling to alter self-destructive behaviors. Clearly, the ready availability of factual information correlates to low rates of infection, even adjusted for cultural proclivities and radically different levels of medical infrastructure. Today, vastly more people are aware of the causes of the disease known as AIDS than will ever contract it. Compare that to the centuries ravaged by the Black Death or, more appropriately, syphilis. It is a contemporary truism that a previously unknown disease might reach New York City at the speed of a jet aircraft. But information spans the globe at the speed of light.

The Internet and Foreign Devils

Just as those ignorant of the sources of infection are more likely to contract AIDS, societies ignorant of global realities are more likely to become victims of the plague of ideas ravishing our world. Troubled, faltering, humiliated societies--and failed individuals everywhere--are more likely to be seduced by lies or comforting myths than are the successful, and the dark side of the information revolution is that it makes a vast spectrum of very bad, stunningly false ideas and notions available to those seeking an impersonal reason for personal failure. Whether speaking of individuals or entire cultures, the successful have a healthy immunity, while the failed and failing are candidates for infection. And yet, establishing a *cordon sanitaire* is as impossible as it is, ultimately, undesirable.

With a sure grip on the past, Jacques Barzun has noted that since the appearance of the railway, mankind has been forced to learn a greater physical dexterity in everyday life to avoid harm from ever-faster-moving, more powerful, and more numerous machines. But 21st-century men and women must add to that skill a dramatically increased intellectual suppleness to avoid being maimed by our informational juggernaut. Only a minority of the earth's population is prepared.

Certainly, the information revolution has spread many good ideas. It is historically positive in its effect, breaking the hold of tyrants and shining the light of knowledge into long-curtained worlds, while enabling phenomenal economic performances. Awareness *is* liberating--but the challenge is to prevent the free-but-frightened from volunteering for an even more dangerous bondage. Different cultures at different levels of development respond differently to the flood of information increasingly available in even remote corners of the planet. Cultures that perceive themselves as making progress display a better collective sense of true and false than those that feel themselves threatened or sense that they are falling behind. As with individuals, the successful are usually willing to accept criticism and learn new techniques that reinforce their success, while the faltering grow increasingly sensitive to criticism, self-doubting, defensive, and close-minded.

Over two centuries ago, Johann Gottfried Herder remarked that encounters between cultures excite self-awareness in those cultures. Today, collisions between cultures infect weaker cultures with self-doubt (loud assertions of superiority are the symptom indicating that the disease has entered a critical phase). We live in a world where the success stories are increasingly evident to all, while the fear of failure haunts *the majority* of the world's population. That fear may manifest itself as rabid pride and spur aggression, but we must not mistake the terrorist's or tyrant's desperation for anything other than what it is: fundamental, inarticulate terror. Spite, hatred, and fitful violence are hallmarks of decline. They are the responses of frightened men who cannot bear the image in the mirror held up by the globalization of information. They imagine, as do children, that they have a choice in their fate, that they can refuse to see what they cannot endure. But the choices confronting information-resistant societies are not really choices at all.

The Brand-X Challenge

Consider the dilemma of Country X. Formerly the colony of a European power, its autocratic government sponsors a restrictive interpretation of the national religion, retains control of all decisions it considers significant, attempts to regulate the information to which its citizens have access, and is baffled that its recently booming economic growth has withered. Its official statements blame an unjust "neo-colonial" economic order for its weakening currency. Intelligent, but aging and increasingly out of touch, its leaders recognize with chagrin that countries they had heckled as yesterday's powers are not only resurgent, but growing wealthier and more dominant by the minute. Its citizens are split between the better-educated, who want greater personal and political freedoms, and the rest, who want a better material life but are more-or-less comfortable with the customary social and moral strictures. Corrupt elites and young people hungry for global culture form the statistical fringes. Younger technocrats within the government attempt to persuade the leadership that economic progress depends on more open policies, including an opening of the society to a liberalized flow of information, but the leadership is reluctant to risk the loss of any control.

The leadership of Country X imagines it faces a dilemma, but really it faces an inevitability. Better than the bright, young technocrats, the old leaders sense that once the informational floodgates are opened a crack, the pressure of the informational waters will force them open the rest of the way. They fear (rightly) that greater awareness of the world will bring with it demands for change and (wrongly) that it will bring a moral collapse. They worry (rightly) that a general availability of information will erode their monopoly on power and reveal their shortcomings, while worrying (wrongly) that the Western-dominated internet and the rest of this suspicious "information revolution" is just a return of colonialism in disguise, even a plot to dominate their country and its culture. The leaders *think* they have a choice between continuing to restrict the flow of information and opening those floodgates.

Strengthening the dikes no longer works. Faced with the global torrent of information, you either learn to swim or you drown.

The leadership's only choice, to the extent Country X has one, is between letting the economy and society go hungry for the informational nutrition it needs to have even a hope of competing globally or accepting a threatening loss of

authority. And the lesson of liberalization that authoritarian regimes draw from the events of the last decade is that, once begun, the pace and scope of liberalization cannot be controlled. So the leadership argues and dithers, making cosmetic attempts at alternative reforms and reassuring themselves with state banquets. Meanwhile, the plague of ideas has already infected the population to a greater extent than the old men realize.

Except in the cases of utterly failed states, such as North Korea, the march of information is relentless. Attempts to block its progress result only in collapsing competitiveness and a delay in beginning the long, imperfect process of educating the country's citizens to tell fact from fiction. The choice isn't between prolonging an idyll and risking change, but between a belated attempt to secure a global niche and a decline into obscurantism likely to end in prolonged violence and general incapability. Leaders who convince themselves that they can preserve rigid informational hierarchies refuse to see the signs that those hierarchies are already eroding underneath them. Soon enough, they will have no credibility and no effective means to halt the disintegration of social order and the state they cherish.

And what of that charge of neo-colonialism? Is it any more than the demagogue's incitement of a restive population to blame foreign devils for local faults?

The global information revolution is explosive, insidious, irresistible, and destructive of traditional orders. It increases Western cultural and economic dominance, at least for the present. It is the enemy of all hierarchies except the hierarchy of merit. But it is not a new form of imperialism.

An End, and a Beginning

We stand at the bare beginning of the post-colonial era. Following 500 years of European colonial domination of the world, much of it involving physical occupation, we have hardly begun the process of recovery from colonialism's deformations and the digestion of its legacies, both positive and negative. The old colonial world is still in a disintegrative stage, wrestling with faulty borders agreed in distant capitals and with the inheritance of the European-model nation-state itself--which may prove to be the most fateful legacy of all. Now that the last of the great physical empires is gone, the mini-empires left behind in the colonial wake--artificial states such as Nigeria, Congo, the Russian Federation, the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Pakistan, Indonesia, and, perhaps, India--are breaking apart or struggling to develop a sustainable political order.

We will be fortunate if the worst of the imperial legacies can be overcome by the end of the new century, and there is no doubt whatsoever that many of today's disorders may be laid at the doorstep of those vanished European empires. Yet, it grows increasingly counterproductive to blame colonialism for today's poor choices. We may blame 19th-century conferences in Berlin when Africa's borders provoke and exacerbate bloodshed, but no one can fault Europe (or the United States) when the leader of a state that has been independent for half a century looks the other way when his own citizens are massacred because of their religion or ethnicity, or when he stages show trials of potential rivals that alienate the greater world and its investors, or when he imagines that national ignorance is not only bliss, but economically productive.

Despite the fact that we will all wrestle with colonialism's legacies for many decades to come, there is no further utility, if there ever was any, in obsessive, paralyzing accusations. To blame is to enjoy oneself at the expense of achievement. Europe no longer has a colonial problem. Except for the occasional military intervention or embassy evacuation in a legacy state unable to function responsibly, Europe has washed its hands of any serious responsibilities left over from the colonial era, while concentrating on business (and while business practices can be devastating, they are not synonymous with imperialism). If anything, backward, protectionist elements in Europe worry about becoming the victims of a "hyper-power" America they have conjured as their own imperialist threat, forgetting that real imperialism is bloody, commanding, possessive, physically present, economically outmoded, and a very poor business model.

Imperialism is also purposeful. But the global information revolution is creatively anarchic, subject to that invisible hand, not to the hands of statesmen who can barely send an e-mail. Indeed, had the marketplace been allowed to determine the course of the European colonial adventure, many lands would never have been occupied, or would have been handed back to their occupants far sooner. There were certainly exceptions, but, overall, imperialism was about vanity more than it was about sound economics. The United States, for its part, willingly suffers no end of public

humiliations as long as the business side of the relationship is good. Above all, as the Soviet Union finally realized in its death throes, old-fashioned imperialism is simply too costly. When merchants traveled the world to trade, the risks made perfect economic sense. But when armies followed, the results rarely paid a return--or did so with destructive results, as in the case of Spain's colonial bounty.

Imperialism is an expensive boot on an impoverished neck. The information revolution is a boot in the backside of those who move too slowly. The age of Western imperialism is over. But the triumph of the knowledge-based economy has barely begun.

Perhaps the best thing we in the West can wish for the many states (logical or illogical in their geographic contours), cultures, and civilizations that endured imperialist occupation or suffered its lesser attentions would be that they might gain a level of intellectual sobriety that would allow them to assess colonialism's legacies honestly, both the bad and the good. For there was much good done, as well, if some of it was incidental. Independence will be mature when former colonies can acknowledge their debt to those imperial powers that left behind an educated civil-servant class, traditions of law-based government, at least the shadow of democracy, physical infrastructure that still functions, and that ultimate enabler of the information age, the English language. After the honest weighing up, those states and peoples have to move on, to look forward and not pick eternally at yesterday's sores. But the chances are not good for such an objective evaluation: Blame is too addictive and comforting. Blame is the heroin of dying regimes.

I'll close my ears, I'll shut my eyes . . .

The consequences when governments wage a hopeless struggle to restrict the flow of information to their populations may be varied, but they are all bad. The plague of ideas affects even countries such as the United States, or Germany, or England, spreading ludicrous, exculpatory beliefs among the underclass and leading to occasional acts of violence--but it does not impede progress on any front for the majority of the citizens, nor does it threaten the government. For most citizens of informationally adept states, the abundant availability of data and the access to a swift flow of ideas is every bit as empowering as television commercials sponsored by high-tech firms would have it. But in societies that, literally, believe what they want to believe because they have not developed the discriminating mechanisms that prevent self-delusion, the information explosion leads to other types of explosions, some of them bluntly physical. Only an informed population has any hope of developing successfully on any front in the new millennium.

The ignorant believe lies. This is a fundamental truth in all cultures, illustrated by the universal appeal of rumors and the alacrity with which men and women believe the worst of their neighbors. Now, much current repression--in mainland China, for example--is based upon a misreading of the fact that those denied global frames of reference will embrace local fantasies. The problem is that the informationally deprived won't necessarily believe the lies the leaders in the capital city want them to accept. Far too many heads of state and ruling cabals, worried about the durability of their regimes, have muttered along with the exhortations of religious fundamentalists in the hope of renewing their appeal to the masses. This is disastrous--for the population, for progress, for the economy, for minorities, and, more often than not, for the leadership that opened the lid on this worst of Pandora's many dreadful boxes. Playing the ethnic nationalist card is almost as bad, and occasionally more direct in its incitement to violence. When, as in Suharto-era Indonesia, the leadership panders to both nationalist and religious elements, the state is torn apart.

The collapse into obscurantism initially appeals to much of the public in underdeveloped states, as well as to their misguided, selfish leaders. Yet, the infatuation rarely lasts--witness the internal struggles in Iran today. While opening the gates wide to today's torrent of information destabilizes traditional structures if they are unsound and lack the required suppleness to adapt to contemporary needs, attempting to keep those gates shut is far, far more dangerous. An informationally naïve population has a better chance of adjusting to the shock effect of informational freedom than to continued deprivation in a changing, inevitably intrusive world. The upheaval delayed is only intensified, and the time lost cannot be recovered. Iran has lost a quarter century, Burma and North Korea twice as long, and even states such as Saudi Arabia, which may appear successful to some, are brittle, hollow, and unprepared for the changes globalization will force upon them (today's oil-rich states are the post-modern equivalents to imperial Spain, stunted by their addiction to single-source "free" wealth). The populations of such states literally do not know what to believe, and, given human nature, many of their citizens are apt to believe the worst. Even Russia, which has pretended for three centuries to be Western, is a land of wild, inopportune beliefs.

As noted above, some information always seeps through. In the absence of trustworthy comparative data, it is almost always misinterpreted. Worse, comforting rumors and messages of hate have the power of an incantation where countering data is not readily at hand. The peasant or proletarian is unlikely to believe the droning messages from Beijing, but may well believe lies far more dangerous and more pleasing.

Nor must the debilitating information be outright lies--it may come as messages of faith assuring believers that all of their failures and lacks are the fault of the infidel abroad and the minority in their midst. The appeal to *believe*, to submerge yourself in the comforting promises of extreme, exclusive religion (comforting as much for the damnation promised to your enemies as for the salvation promised to you), is, of course, timeless. Indeed, the will to faith seems to exist in people everywhere. But the vigorous resurgence of the most intolerant varieties of fundamentalism--Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Hindu--is demonstrably a product of the decades-long process of globalization and the threatening (to the less capable, the weak, the fearful) flood of information sweeping over the planet.

Extreme religious fundamentalism, like oppressive ethnic nationalism, is not an indication of a strong faith or shining conviction. On the contrary, the human being of deep, abiding faith can afford to be tolerant in thought and deed, to question and be questioned. Those who are comfortable with their deity are comfortable with their neighbors. They are also open to change, once they are convinced of its utility. Doctrinally rigid fundamentalism is *always* a symptom of insecure faith. This age of resurgent belief is really one of explosive doubt.

Those who feel compelled to force their vision of God upon others are trying to convince themselves, thus their ferocity. The possibility that alternative paths to salvation exist isn't an affront to their God, but a personal threat to them. We see it in the cruel cleric everywhere, and in the villager who murders the neighbor converted away from the old faith, in the unemployed American who attacks a "Godless" family-planning clinic, in the warrior who insists that God Himself denies rights to women, and in all those who insist not only that those of other faiths are doomed, but that their own more tolerant co-religionists are damned, as well.

The weak need certainty, while the strong can afford doubt (and reasonable doubts are the catalyst of all human progress). As with men, so with nations. Failing states and cultures crave beliefs as firm as iron. But iron, struck with sufficient force, shatters. The information revolution has the required force, and to spare.

Wars and Rumors of War

The information wars have already begun. They have little to do with the Pentagon's dreams of cyber-strikes and network paralysis, although these are certainly matters worthy of judicious consideration. The information wars that will shape our time are not about what information is electronically vulnerable, but about what information is culturally permissible. The closest military organizations come to the real challenge is when they attempt, amateurishly, psychological operations campaigns or fumble with "perception management."

Certainly, the digital dimension has expanded, somewhat, the range of conventional war--but conventional war is of declining relevance. What matters is the power of information to terrify men of decayed belief. We live in a world in which the West is most willing to fight for economic causes, while the rest of the world squabbles over identity, be it religious or ethnic. Certainly, there have been plenty of rehearsals for these conflicts over blood and belief down the millennia, but the global lines have never been so sharply drawn. On one side are the Western and sympathetic states that believe in the freedom of information, while the opposition is composed of those terrified at the freedom information brings. This is not a precursor to a next world war--humankind is too disparate, and material power too lopsided at present. Rather, it portends a long, bitter, intermittent series of struggles on various fronts between those who cling to the hope that they can control their neighbor's beliefs and behaviors, and those states committed to the risks, misbehaviors, and triumphs of free societies. Barring unforeseeable cataclysms, the free societies will win. But the extent of human misery we shall see along the way is incalculable.

Consider a minor player on the world stage who has been hyped by his enemies into international stardom. Osama bin Laden is not waging war against the West's realities. He doesn't know them. He struggles against a riveting, overwhelming, wildly skewed, personal vision of the West, exemplified by an America he has conjured from shreds of information and his own deepest fears. (A startling Freudian note is that *all* cultures in which women are openly

repressed and the males remain psychologically infantile display strong anti-American currents--Western civilization's discontents are minor compared to those crippling social relations elsewhere.) Mr. bin Laden's acolytes know little--often nothing--of the mundane West, but are galvanized by the psychologically rewarding opportunity to hate. Men of few earthly prospects, they imagine a divine mission for themselves. It is the summit of self-gratification.

The remarkable ability of men and women to deny reality is driven home by Osama bin Laden's counterparts in the United States itself: those citizens who, in the Year of Our Lord 2000, want to ban the teaching of evolution, remove "offensive" books from school shelves, limit women's choices, and glorify themselves by consigning their fellow citizens to a medieval version of Hell. It is never enough to "protect" their own children or spouses--those immoralists who do not see the light must be protected from themselves. It is an old and universal story newly supercharged by the threats the literalists of faith detect in the information age--although, like those elsewhere who reject the content, they are usually ready to employ the means of the information revolution to their own ends.

An exemplary case from the technologically distant past is the Iranian revolution of the late 1970s. The faction that ultimately seized control of the state apparatus had as its goal secession from the Western-dominated course of history. Yet even 20 years ago--light years in informational terms--it proved impossible. The most powerful result of the Iranian revolution has been to deny Iran the chance to behave competitively for more than two decades--while killing a great many Iranians along the way. At the risk of redundancy: There is no real choice. You either out-perform the global leaders, create a competitive niche, or fall behind. Cultural and economic autonomy is no longer possible.

Recently, in Indonesia, we have seen the inevitable consequences of informational underdevelopment when exacerbated by demagoguery (and by irrational borders). In East Timor, in Aceh, the Moluccas, and elsewhere, the global plague of ideas spurred hateful messages of nationalism and religious fundamentalism that destroyed Indonesia's threadbare hope of being an equitable, secular state. In the absence of trustworthy data and a framework for national understanding, rumors ignited massacres. And now it is too late to preserve the Indonesian state within its post-colonial borders without levels of oppression the rest of the world is likely to find intolerable. Regarding the remarks above to the effect that the European concept of the state--with all its vanities--may prove imperialism's most pernicious legacy, Jakarta's reflexive unwillingness to consider a peaceful shedding of those regions that reject its rule underscores the point.

In mainland China, the Beijing government wages multiple counter-informational campaigns against its own population, from utterly wrongheaded attempts to regulate the internet and limit access to technologies to the suppression of religious sects that likely would have found far fewer adherents in a more informationally adept state. In India, Hindu extremists sense that traditional advantages are undermined by any increase in social and religious freedoms, so they murder Christian converts and missionaries. In Kashmir, religion overlaid with ethnicity draws endless blood on both sides. In Pakistan, a pandering leader banished English-language curricula from the school system a quarter century ago in an early nod to anti-globalization pressures. Since then, Pakistan has gone backward in virtually every sphere, and is less equipped for global competition than it was when Zulfikar ali Bhutto did more than any other man in its history to destroy the country's future.

Overdue Upheavals

The popular struggles, terrorist acts, violent conflicts, and occasional wars ignited by the global information revolution will prove largely impossible to prevent, since few states will be willing to take the risks involved in unclenching antiquated notions of sovereignty in time for their citizens to find a comfortable place in the new global environment. The information revolution can only be locally delayed, not avoided. Unschooled populations will be exposed, haphazardly, to data they cannot digest, resulting in local tumult and transnational acts of desperation.

Yet, there is a positive transformation on the horizon, if still a distant one. The era of the common man that Marxism failed so painfully to induce is coming at last, driven by the democratization of information. For all the dangers described above, facts in the hands of men and women everywhere will ultimately displace even the sweetest falsehoods--though the latter will never disappear entirely, given human nature and even the best society's inevitable inequities. The problem is not the ultimate end, but the long, difficult transition faced by the world in our lifetimes.

Still, those of us who believe in the importance of fundamental human rights and decencies have reasons aplenty for

optimism. Never before has there been such an irresistible threat to the old, unjust orders. We have entered an age when the individual's ability to comprehend data, assimilate ideas, and synthesize innovations upsets hierarchies that have apportioned unmerited rewards for centuries. This is the age not only of mass culture, but of opportunity for the masses. While much of the West has a lead of a century or two, the effects have begun to reach the remotest outposts of oppression. Already, an Untouchable may prove a far better software writer than a Brahmin; a woman may demand a voice in her own fate (still at her own risk, though); the highly talented outsider trumps the backward insider; victims tell their tales to microphones and video cameras; and people everywhere have a growing awareness, however flawed, of the possibilities that would be their birthright elsewhere. Add greed and fear on the part of those whose traditional privileges are under assault and the likelihood of violent upheavals and reactions threatens to slow, if not outpace, progress in many lagging countries. Yet, many an individual will shine, and in the end it is the genius of those individuals that will bring about the collapse of the last autocratic regimes.

The information revolution is by far the greatest transnational threat of our time. It is also man's hope. I believe, firmly, that societies that embrace informational freedom will triumph. But the victory will not come without costs.

Ralph Peters retired from the US Army shortly after his promotion to lieutenant colonel. He is the author of ten books, including *Fighting for the Future: Will America Triumph?*. His essays and commentaries on military and strategic themes have appeared in a wide range of American and international newspapers and journals, and he is a frequent contributor to *Parameters*.

Reviewed 17 November 2000. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil